

# *Sketch*

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## Just a Matter of Time

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## Just a Matter of Time

*by H. C. Vardaman*

. . . . and to think how innocently this all started! . . . .

Barbara Engle sat stiffly in the straight-backed old classroom chair, mechanically snapping her purse open and closed. Only a small lamp on the secretary's desk lighted the little anteroom off the superintendent of school's office.

Behind her, through the heavy oak door, dull, unintelligible voices muttered on, punctuated only by a coarse cough now and then. The Wellston School Board was sitting in special session, reviewing the evidence against Wellston's newest and most popular English teacher.

She hadn't been sitting there long — not more than ten or fifteen minutes, but the dark, hollow halls amplified every tick-tock of the somber old wall clock just outside the office, till Barbara could only stare hypnotically at the slender scuffed heel of her shoe and snap her purse catch in time with the ticking clock.

She knew why she was there; yet she didn't. She was there because she'd been seen with a young man at night. With a decent young man, her own age — an auto mechanic. . . . so what can they say about that? . . . they surely won't try to tell a 22-year-old woman how to spend her free

evenings . . . . they CAN'T tell me who to associate with! . . . They CAN'T tell me I have to go talk English with old Goggle-Eyes Spedding, that ANCIENT old maid! . . . . 'Go see Miss Spedding every Saturday evening, and the two of you decide whether the sophomores or the juniors should read *Silas Marner* next spring!' . . . . what a punishment THAT would be! . . . . they CAN'T tell me a thing like THAT! . . . .

Tick - tock - click - snap.

Barbara KNEW something was going to come of this meeting with the school board. She closed her eyes and shuddered, remembering how she'd hated the stodgy old group after her job interview with them.

Tick - tock - click - snap.

. . . . and the president of the board . . . . bushy-browed old Mr. McGlynn - what does he know about English teachers or English anyway? . . . . except that you have to yell loud to get a point across . . . . and the way he keeps his big gold watch in his hand all the time . . . . and the rest of the board. . . . that shriveled little Mrs. Boston - always nods her head whenever Mr. McGlynn speaks. . . . Mr. Morton, the middle-aged one - the superintendent of schools. . . . Mr. Gregory and Mr. Adams - both of them young men, who would sometimes smile at you, and look attentive when you talked. . . . and the secretary of the board, Mrs. Blake - always wearing health shoes and no hose. . . . I'll bet you could take a snapshot of that group, hang it next to Rembrandt's "The Directors" and never tell the difference. . . . except maybe for Mr. Gregory and Mr. Adams. . . .

Tick - tock - click - snap.

. . . . well anyway. . . . what CAN they do just because a man brought me home one night. . . . and snoopy Mr. Walton's dog barked at us, and snoopy Mr. Walton saw us sitting in the car? . . . . what a day it'll be when a woman can't choose her own friends. . . . but I guess that's just what CAN happen in a town of 900. . . .

Tick - tock - click - snap.

Suddenly, the sound of a heavy chair sliding across a wood floor came from inside the office, followed by heavy footsteps toward the door. The door opened, and Barbara

glanced down at the floor beside her chair as Mr. McGlynn brushed past. Several coughs came from within the office.

"Uh, we'll see you now, Miss Engle," Mr. McGlynn said, looking at his watch. "Just go in and sit there at the end of the table."

Barbara stood and fussed with her dress, smoothing the wrinkles around the belt. Mr. McGlynn stepped out into the hall, where he squinted at the ticking clock, then checked his watch by it.

"NOW, Miss Engle! We'll see you NOW!" The president's voice rose threateningly. "Right there at the end of the table!"

Barbara sat down at the end of the table, her eyes focused on the sheaf of papers which Mrs. Boston and the superintendent were thumbing through. Mr. Gregory and Mr. Adams, the younger men on her right, ignored her and talked quietly between themselves. Prim little Mrs. Blake sat over at the superintendent's desk with her short-hand pad, studying the newcomer intently.

The door slammed solidly as Mr. McGlynn stepped into place at the far end of the table. Laying his watch on the table, he began.

"I'm sure we all know each other, so there'll be no need for introductions. Miss Engle has come in to tell us her side of the story."

Glaring directly at her, he continued, "You can tell us now, Miss Engle, just what happened that night."

Barbara unconsciously crossed her legs and straightened her back. "Well, I was at a party over in Groton, in the home of an old college girl friend of mine. She introduced me to this fellow, and. . . .," Barbara took a deep breath, "uh, she'd known him for several years and he seemed to be a nice fellow."

"Miss Engle," Mr. McGlynn interrupted, "please just tell us what happened later — AFTER the party!"

"Well, he seemed like a nice guy, and since he could save my girlfriend a trip by bringing me home, I . . . I consented to ride with him. He lives here in Wellston, too. You all know who he is. So," Barbara shrugged, "he brought me home — that's all."

Mrs. Boston raised her brows and innocently queried, "Did the young man bring you DIRECTLY home, Miss Engle?"

"Well, we DID sit in the car and talk a few minutes, I guess," Barbara replied.

"Miss Engle, was there any liquor served at that party?" Mr. McGlynn asked.

"I saw none."

"NOW, Miss Engle," boomed Mr. McGlynn, "this young man is a mechanic, isn't he?"

"Yes, something like that, I think."

"Yes, he IS — an automobile mechanic. Miss Engle, . . . it is the feeling of this board that a teacher in our school system should at all times be most careful of his or her associates. This is not a — a MANDATE; we consider it more of — of a sort of PRECAUTIONARY measure, both for our teachers' welfare and the welfare of our children and their impressionable minds."

Barbara nodded.

"I might also mention, Miss Engle, that some very wholesome, lasting marriages have resulted from teachers' social contacts WITHIN our school system! That should be something for you to think about. NOW — as to the procedure of this meeting. We have studied the facts of your case as they were presented to us, and we will carefully consider your statements. After that, we will take a vote. There will be no reprimand to you in connection with this hearing, or anything of the sort. Just a simple vote — on whether or not to retain your services as a teacher. Majority rules. If that is all clear, you may leave. If you want to wait outside, that will be fine. If not, I'll phone you after we decide."

"Thank you," Barbara said quietly, and stood to leave. "I'll wait outside."

"OH! Before you leave, maybe some other board member would like to ask you a question."

Barbara hesitated at the door and looked back toward the Board. Young Mr. Gregory smiled faintly at her. No one spoke. Mr. McGlynn picked up his watch.

Out in the anteroom again, Barbara's heart beat furiously. . . . whether or not to retain your services as a teacher!

. . . . not just a simple reprimand! . . . . HAH! . . . . what a bunch of drawing-room daisies! . . . . how old-fashioned can you get? . . . . so what if he IS a mechanic? . . . . and DOESN'T always use the right verb tense? . . . . he had some good ideas . . . . and he WASN'T fresh! . . . .

Tick — tock — tick — tock.

She picked up her chair and moved it over right next to the door. The door was thick, but the voices inside could be heard, however faint.

"NOW! We've reviewed the case and heard Miss Engle's story. I see no reason to postpone the voting. Are there any questions? . . . Fine! I will read your names in alphabetical order. Vote 'yes' to retain Miss Engle, and 'no' if you favor her dismissal."

"Adams."

. . . . c'mon, Mr. Adams — surely YOU aren't swayed by ol' man McGlynn! . . . .

"Yes."

"Mrs. Boston."

"No!" she replied instantly.

Tick — tock — tick — tock.

"Uh — Gregory."

. . . . Gregory. . . . Gregory. . . . what's his daughter's name? . . . . Joyce! . . . . such a nice girl. . . . PLEASE, Mr. Gregory! . . . .

"Yes."

"Uh, my vote's next. I vote no."

"Morton."

Barbara's heart raced wildy. She could hardly breathe.

. . . . two to two. . . . the young against the old. . . . PLEASE, Mr. Morton. . . . the superintendent always stands up for his teachers. . . . PLEASE! . . . .

Barbara squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and clutched her purse. . . . PLEASE! . . . .

"Morton!" Mr. McGlynn repeated.

"No."

Hot tears welled into Barbara's eyes, and out onto her burning cheeks. The voices behind the door faded.

Tick — tock — tick — tock.

She shakily tip-toed out into the hall, then stiffened.

Tick — tock — tick — tock.

Without a breath, she turned to the clock and opened the face-cover. Just a touch, and the pendulum stopped.

Mr. McGlynn would never know the difference.

## Of You I Sing

*by Donald Watkins*

I sing of you in the night  
whose greatest darkness  
stands in polite rows of  
listening, listening;  
flowing nowhere to adjust a star's shadow,  
there disappearing in the smile of the moon.  
I dote on an incomparable melody,  
one whose sharp smooth striking  
shatters the brittleness  
of a glass  
called  
I  
sing,  
unsure of the song whose least truth has crumbled glass.